

English Heritage Extensive Urban Survey

An archaeological assessment of

# Rackley

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# SOMERSET EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY

## RACKLEY

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

by Miranda Richardson

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Appendix: *Maps*



## SOMERSET EXTENSIVE URBAN SURVEY

### RACKLEY

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

*Somerset County Council would like to thank all the people who assisted in the compiling or editing of this report.*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

This report forms one of a series commissioned by English Heritage and prepared by Somerset County Council with the aim of assessing urban archaeology as part of the Monuments Protection Programme. The work was carried out from 1994 to 1998 by Clare Gathercole and Miranda Richardson (from 1996), managed by Chris Webster. The reports are essentially as completed during that period but have been updated by Chris Webster with new archaeological information in early 2003.

English Heritage has funded two programmes assess the urban archaeological resource - intensive and extensive. The former is restricted to the major historic cities, characterised by a great depth of archaeological remains, a wealth of historical documentation and in many cases, by a great deal of archaeological investigation. The extensive urban surveys cover the smaller towns and are based on information in the local Sites and Monuments Record with limited amounts of new information collected during the project. Once the information has been collected and mapped, attention is focused on the analysis of the town plan and defining topographic units within the town. This will lead to the preparation of guidance for planners, developers and others involved in the management of the town.

#### II. MAJOR SOURCES

##### 1. *Primary documents*

A number of medieval documents exist concerning the port of Rackley, maintenance of the river and the grant of a market and borough charter in 1189.

##### 2. *Local histories*

There is no local history written for Rackley although it is mentioned in a history of Compton Bishop by Margaret Jordan (1994). Frances Neale has looked at the documentary evidence and earthwork features on the site (unpublished notes SMR ), otherwise information has been drawn from Aston and Leech's *Historic Towns in Somerset* (1977:177).

##### 3. *Maps*

A map entitled 'A plan of tenements, lands and grounds Exchanged within the Parish of Compton Bishop in the County of Somerset', and dated 1779 includes Rackley. Rackley is erroneously named Ripley on the 1811 OS Surveyor's Drawings and is shown on the 1839 Tithe Map occupying the north bank of the Cheddar Yeo or New Axe. Other than these the OS series has been used for this report.

#### III. A BRIEF HISTORY OF RACKLEY

The settlement is situated on the Cheddar Yeo river just above its confluence with the Axe. It is strung between the parallel Rackley Lane and Webbington Road, immediately south of the village of Compton Bishop.

Rackley is a failed attempt to found a market and trading town to rival Axbridge and Lower Weare at the end of the 12th century. In 1179 the Pope confirmed to the Bishop of Bath and Wells the village of Compton with the port of 'Radeclive'. In 1189 Richard I granted a charter to the Bishop of Bath 'that he may make a borough on his own land of Radeclive...with a market and other free customs and liberties that any borough has that is on our land in England'. In 1324 Edward II confirmed the borough, however by the end of the 14th century there is documentary evidence that the port was in decline. Scouring of the river between 'Radclyff and Bulhurst' is recorded in 1527.

Since the medieval period Rackley has remained a small hamlet consisting of two or three farms, much as it is today.

## IV. THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RACKLEY

### GENERAL COMMENTS

#### 0.1 Archaeological work in the town

There has been no archaeological work carried out at Rackley.

#### 0.2 Standing structures and visible remains

There are a series of earthwork features relating to the deserted medieval settlement along the north bank of the river.

### 1. PREHISTORIC

(Map A)

#### 1.1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge

To the north of the settlement two cave sites have been the subject of excavations. Scragg's Hole was excavated by W. Stanton between 1945-7. The second cave known as Picken's Hole was excavated by Tratman and ApSimon in the 1960s (SMR 10459, SM 13262).

#### 1.2 Context

Rackley is one of 37 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is as yet no strong evidence of prehistoric settlement on the site of the later town - though it should be remembered that it is notoriously difficult for archaeologists to demonstrate a prehistoric presence in modern urban areas. Whilst 'towns' were not, generally speaking, a feature of prehistoric landscapes, many of the same factors which made the site desirable in later periods would already have been operative. The Mendip upland sites above Rackley- which include nationally important occupation and burial sites dating from the Palaeolithic period onwards, and provide evidence of connections with dominant neolithic and bronze age cultures to the east - are likely to represent but a partial survival of a wider landscape.

#### 1.3 Archaeological features (centre), shown on Map A

##### 1.3.a Other

RAC/101

##### Cave Sites (SMR 10459, SM 13262)

Picken's Hole is situated on the south-east ridge of Crook Peak, it consists of a small cave and a rock shelter which follows the rock escarpment on either side of the cave opening. The cave itself is 4m long and has an entrance 1.5m high and has been almost wholly excavated. Outside the cave there are large areas of intact deposits running parallel with the rock outcrop. Excavations were carried out between 1961-7 by Bristol Speleological Society under the direction of Tratman and ApSimon. Samples were taken in 1980 for radiocarbon dating which put the range of deposits as 25-37000bp. These were associated with faunal remains and artefacts. (ApSimon 1986, Tratman 1964)

The site forms part of one of the most important concentration of Palaeolithic cave sites in the country and is of particular importance due to the presence of rare Middle and Early Upper Palaeolithic artefacts.

Scragg's Hole was partially excavated by Stanton in the 1940's, however no excavation records have been located.

*Taken from SMR map*

### 2. ROMAN

(Map A)

#### 2.1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge

As above.

## 2.2 Context

The Roman period was one of deliberate, strategic urbanisation. The area which is now Somerset appears to have been less affected than some other areas by this, in that few really urban sites are known, and this probably reflects its marginal position. However, the widespread distribution of Roman or Romanised settlements shows that the county - particularly east of the Parrett - was heavily populated and exploited in this period.

Rackley is one of 26 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is as yet no evidence of Roman settlement on the site of the later town. This lay downstream of an identified cluster of settlement around Cheddar and along the Axe, and may have been subject to flooding in the Roman period.

## 2.3 Archaeological features (centre), shown on Map A

### 2.3.a Other

RAC/201

Cave Sites (SMR 10459, SM 13262)

Stanton apparently found a Romano-British deposit during excavations at Scragg's Hole and Tratman also found a few, small Romano-British sherds at Picken's Hole.

*Taken from SMR map*

## 3. SAXON

*(No Map)*

### 3.1 Archaeological work in the town

Although the settlement at Compton Bishop is likely to have had early origins, there is as yet no known use of river wharves or settlement at Rackley in this period.

### 3.2 Context

Though the post-Roman and early Saxon periods were characterised by a return to non-urban lifestyles, the later Saxon period (from the 8th or 9th century onwards) saw the beginnings of a resurgence of first trading places and then towns, under the control of the Saxon royal families, in the context of a network of royal estate administration centres and subordinate settlements which was already established (in some cases long-established). Though only a relatively small number of places with any claim to be towns existed by the time of the Domesday Survey, many of the subordinate settlements recorded at that point were to become towns in the medieval period. In fact, Rackley is one of only five of the 45 historic towns covered by this project at which there is no evidence of settlement before the medieval period.

## 4. MEDIEVAL

*(Map B)*

### 4.1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge

None.

### 4.2 Context

Both in Britain and on the continent, the medieval period saw the growth of town foundation and, to an extent, urban living (though the bulk of the population continued to live in villages). The reasons for this growth were many and complex. In England they included both general factors - such as the growth of mercantile trade (especially the cloth trade) - and more specific ones - such as the post-Conquest establishment of a network of (theoretically) loyal magnates and prelates with large estates and commercial privileges. The latter led to the increasing relaxation of the royal stranglehold on the profits of towns and chartered boroughs (where tenants paid cash rents and were free of feudal ties), which in turn enabled the establishment of new purpose-built commercial areas (the majority of places classed as towns in the medieval period have at least some planned elements). Of course, some boroughs were already in existence by the Conquest, and the existing pattern of Saxon urban or semi-urban centres was an important influence on the medieval one. This is evident in Somerset which, like many parts of the south and west (where the majority of the Saxon *burhs* and boroughs had been established), was peppered with small boroughs in the medieval period.

In archaeological terms, the medieval towns are characterised by evidence of partially planned, intensive occupation of restricted areas. Typical features which may occur include: regular, or semi-regular, street layouts; large market places (usually obscured by later encroachments); blocks of regular, long, narrow, plots end on to the commercial frontage; churchyards, either within the medieval layout or outside it - the latter often indicative of a deliberate shift of activity; regular or irregular suburbs or marginal areas occupied by quays, or industrial sites such as mills; and high status sites such as castles, manor sites and large religious precincts.

Rackley is one of six of the 45 historic towns identified by this project which were set up in the 12th and 13th centuries as completely new towns on greenfield sites, from an existing settlement or borough (this does not include planned extensions *within* existing boroughs, of which there were also a number). All of these new towns were given borough status by their founders - in this case the Bishops of Wells, one of three foundations from Wells - and were subsequently abandoned, or semi-abandoned, with consequently good archaeological preservation. Rackley was also one of eleven of the 45 towns which had a harbour or quays in the medieval period.

#### 4.3 *Standing structures and visible remains*

A series of earthwork features mark house platforms along Rackley Lane (Neale F. unpublished map in SMR).

#### 4.4 *Archaeological components (centre), shown on Map B*

##### 4.4.a *Communications*

###### (a) *Roads, streets and routeways*

###### RAC/401 Rackley Lane, Webbington Road

The area of earthworks so far identified is spread between these two roads and the river. If the borough referred to in the 1189 charter was formally laid out lanes linking these two might be expected.

*After 1799 parish map of Compton Bishop.*

###### (b) *Bridges*

###### RAC/402

A bridge is shown at Rackley on Saxton's 1575 map of Somerset, possibly linking Rackley to further wharves at Hythe House on the River Axe.

*After Saxton's 1575*

###### (c) *Harbour and quays*

###### RAC/403

Francis Neale has proposed an area of earthworks to the east of that plotted here, that can be interpreted as quays related to the medieval settlement (unpublished map in SMR). However, this area may have been more extensive at the height of river trade. A mooring stone was found in c.1963 at Rackley, set into the river bank. It is now situated in the garden of Under Compton cottage (Hack 1988:672).

*After Francis Neale's Map in SMR and 1799 parish map of Compton Bishop.*

##### 4.4.b *Settlement (Urban)*

###### (a) *Market place(s)*

###### RAC/404

It is as yet unclear as to the extent to which the grants of the 1189 charter were carried out but supposing Rackley had a market place it is likely to have been situated in the triangle formed by the junction of Rackley Lane and Webbington Road.

*After 1839 Tithe Map.*

###### (b) *Burgage plots*

###### RAC/405

The 1799 map shows a series of long narrow strips of fairly regular width running between Rackley Lane and Webbington Road which could be formal burgage plots laid out following the grant of a borough in 1189. No sign of these survives in the 19th century maps of settlement and no such structured organisation has been discerned in the series of earthworks which are thought

to represent house platforms. Further investigation is required to determine if these are burgage plots or field strips and if the former to what extent they were occupied.

*After 1799 parish map of Compton Bishop.*

## **5. POST-MEDIEVAL, INDUSTRIAL, 20TH CENTURY (Map C)**

### **5.1 Archaeological work in the town/ Archaeological knowledge** None.

### **5.2 Context**

The basic pattern of towns had been established by the end of the middle ages, and there were very few major changes in the post-medieval period, though the economic fortunes of particular towns rose and fell. Rackley however, is one of nine of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which, though in some way urban in the medieval period, were not really so in the post-medieval period, one of eight places which were not towns in the 19th century, and is one of 30 of the 45 historic towns covered by this project which is not classed as a town in the County Structure Plan.

### **5.3 Archaeological components (centre), shown on Map C**

#### **5.3.a Redevelopment in earlier settlement components**

Following the demise of the port Rackley has become a small hamlet.

#### **5.3.b Communications: bridges**

RAC/602

#### Footbridge

A foot bridge is situated on the Cheddar Yeo, just above its convergence with the Axe.

*Taken from the 1886 OS*

#### **5.3.c Settlement (Rural)**

RAC/601

Building shown on the 1839 Tithe map, 1886 OS and 1904 OS is mapped here. Only minor changes in the extent of the built area are recorded by these maps.

*After 1839 Tithe map, 1886 Os and 1904 OS.*

RAC/701

Some minor expansion has taken place in the 20th century with new building along the Webbington road and a cottage on the south side of the Cheddar Yeo.

*Taken from 1995 digital OS.*



## V. THE POTENTIAL OF RACKLEY

### 1. Research interests

Rackley is of great research interest as a short-lived late 12th century implanted town and port with little later building. Although the extent of the early town is difficult to determine preservation of its archaeological remains is likely to be good, due to its failure to continue much beyond the 14th century.

Rackley also form part of a larger research interest in river trade in the medieval period and particularly in this area the relationship between it and other medieval ports and towns in the Axe valley.

### 2. Areas of potentially exceptional preservation

There may be well preserved waterlogged remains of the wharves along the river banks.

### 3. Limitations

Archaeological remains may have been damaged by ploughing on the west side of the town (Aston and Leech 1977:117-8)

### 4. Extent of current protection

There are no listed buildings, conservation area, AHAP or scheduled monuments in Rackley.

### 5. Management Proposals

See the Archaeological Guidance Document.

## VI. SOURCES

### 1. General documentary

- |   |   |
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| Aston, M & Burrow, I, 1982                      | <i>The Archaeology of Somerset</i>  |
| Aston, M & Leech, R, 1977                       | <i>Historic Towns in Somerset (CRAAGS)</i>  |
| Aston, M & C Lewis (eds), 1994                  | <i>The Medieval Landscape of Wessex</i>   |
| Aston, M & Murless, B, 1978                     | Somerset Archaeology 1978, <i>PSANHS</i> vol 122, 124-134                               |
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| Burrow, I, Minnitt, S & Murless, B (eds), 1981a | Somerset Archaeology, 1979, <i>PSANHS</i> vol 124, 111-140                              |
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## 2. Rackley

- |                          |       |   |
|--------------------------|-------|---|
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| Bond CJ                  | c1990 | <i>Rackley (Unpublished report for MPP)</i>                                       |
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| Hack B                   | 1988  | A Mooring Stone from Rackley <i>NQSD</i> <b>32</b> p672-673                       |
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**3. Maps**

1799	A plan of tenements, lands and grounds exchanged within the parish of Compton Bishop (SRO DD/CC 15874)
1811	OS Surveyor's Drawings (Fiche in SSL)
1839	Tithe Map of Compton Bishop (Fiche in SSL)
1886	OS 1:2500 (Fiche in SSL)
1904	OS 6" (SRO)
1980	OS 1:10 000
1995	Digital OS

**VII. COMPONENT INDEXES****1. Component to map**

Component	Map
RAC/101	A
RAC/201	A
RAC/401	B
RAC/402	B
RAC/403	B
RAC/404	B
RAC/405	B
RAC/601	C
RAC/602	C
RAC/701	C

**2. Component to page**

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RAC/405	.....	6, 11
RAC/601	.....	7, 11
RAC/602	.....	7, 11
RAC/701	.....	7, 11

## Maps

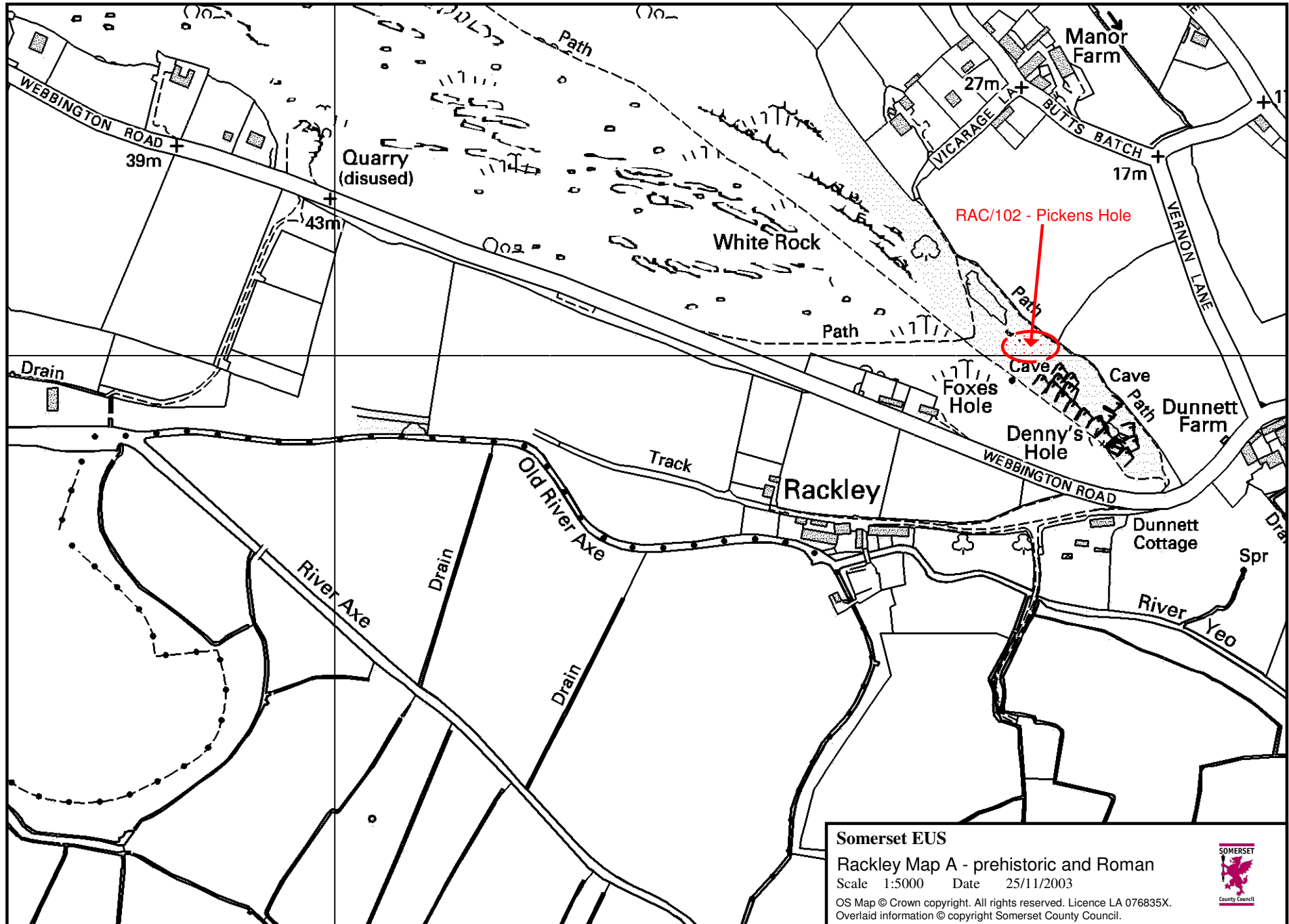
**Map A - prehistoric and Roman**

**Map B - medieval**

**Map C - Post-medieval to modern**

**Map D - Existing designations**

Key: Scheduled Monuments (dark blue),  
Listed Buildings Grade I (light blue, none)  
Grade II\* (light green, none)  
Grade II (green, none)  
Registered Park (brown, none)  
Conservation Area (green, none)  
Area of High Archaeological Potential (pink, Compton Bishop)



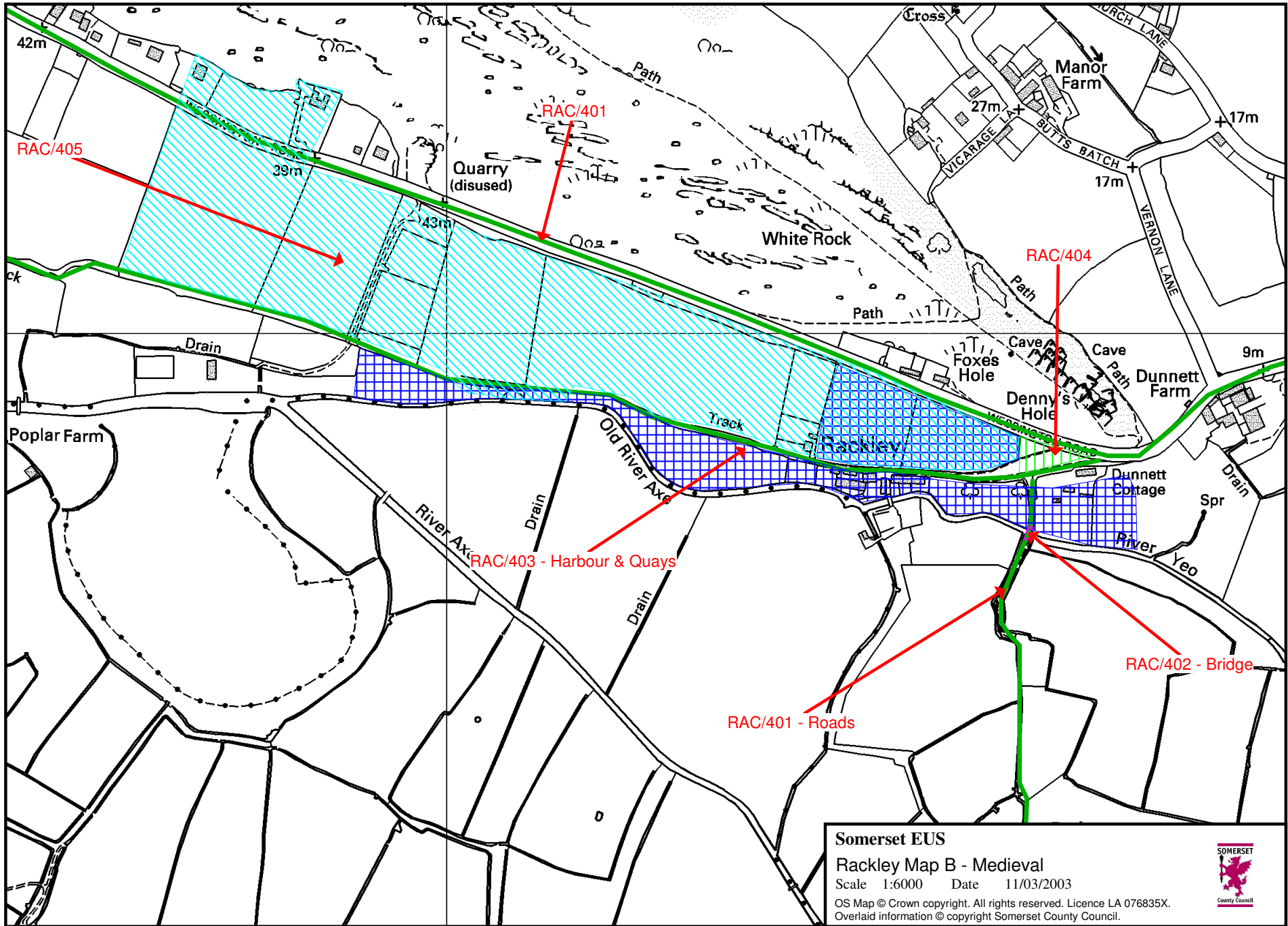
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Rackley Map A - prehistoric and Roman

Scale 1:5000 Date 25/11/2003

OS Map © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence LA 076835X.  
Overlaid information © copyright Somerset County Council.





42m

RAC/405

39m

43m

RAC/401

Quarry (disused)

White Rock

Cross

Manor Farm

27m

+17m

17m

RAC/404

9m

Foxes Hole

Cave

Dunnett Farm

Denny's Hole

Dunnett Cottage

Rackley

River Yeo

Track

Old River Ax

Drain

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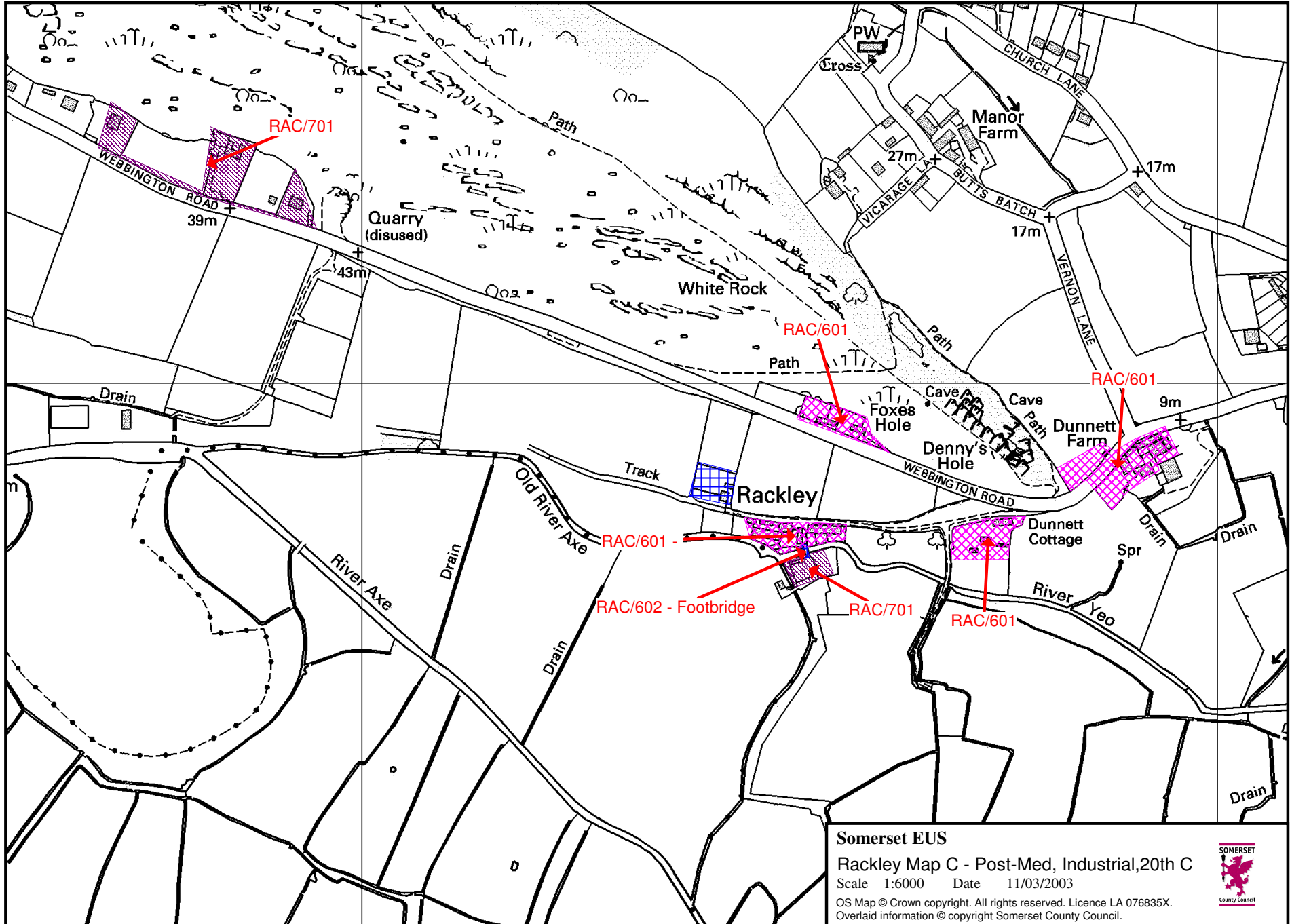
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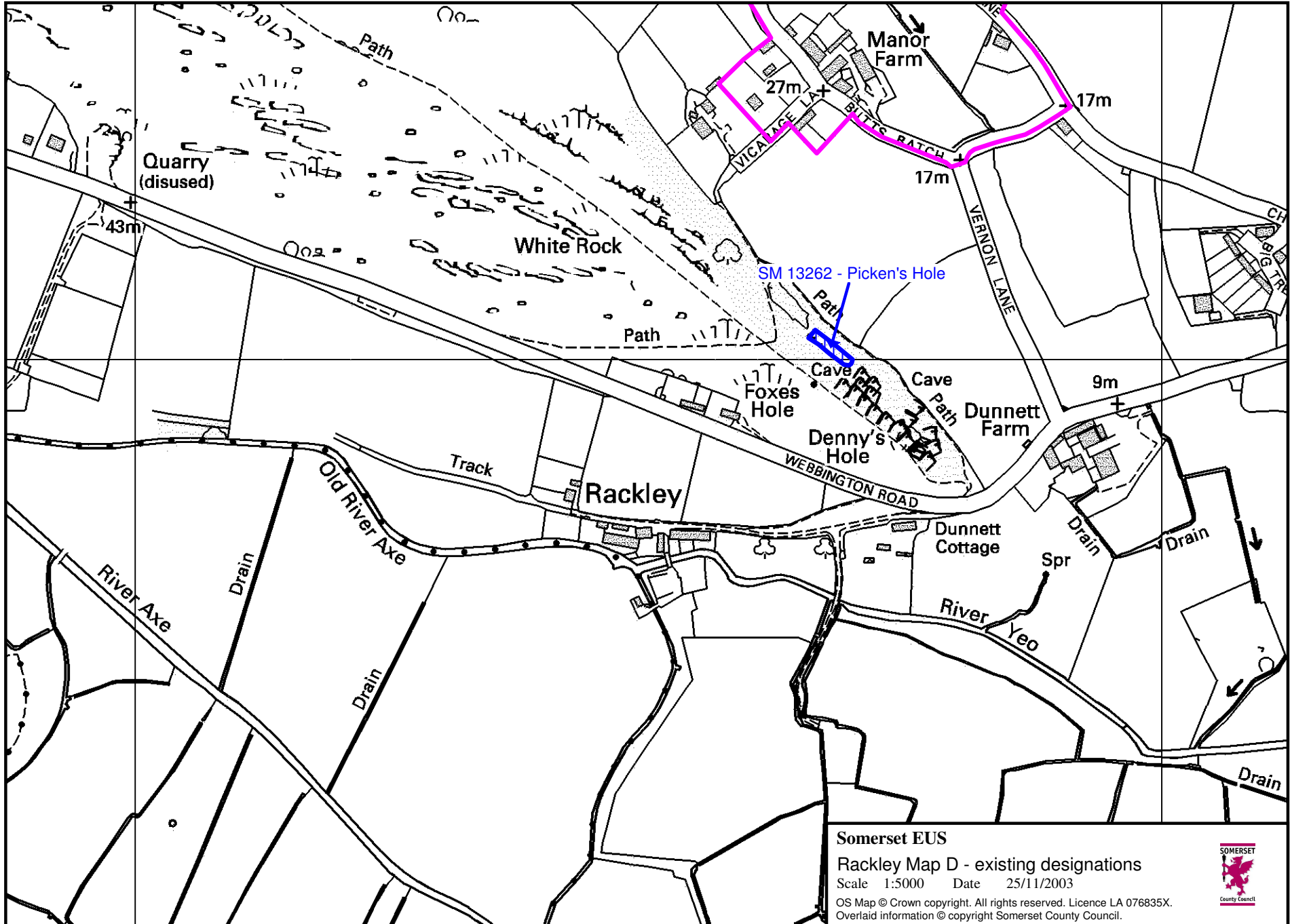
Rackley Map C - Post-Med, Industrial, 20th C

Scale 1:6000 Date 11/03/2003

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Rackley Map D - existing designations

Scale 1:5000 Date 25/11/2003

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